Hooked! True Stories of Obsession, Love, and Death from Alaska's Commercial Fishermen and Women

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IT STARTED IN 1977 on a tiny island in the Gulf of Alaska when I put on my first pair of hip boots and vaulted into a small wooden skiff full of salmon. In my previous life in New Hampshire I had written about everything, surreptitiously scribbling stanzas on restaurant napkins, fussing over line endings on index cards while in line at the store. My step into the skiff, though, was a step into silence. I was sucked under with such force, working twelve to eighteen hours a day, seven days a week, for four months on a remote island incommunicado with the rest of the world—all literary thoughts fled.

Though this world was astonishing—volcanoes spouting over the roofs of the cabins; dailt scenes of whales, seals, sea otters and sea lions daily; winds that blew eighty knots; living on a scrap of land flung onto the Shelikof Strait, sometimes hanging on for life itself. My journal, which I had kept faithfully for ten years, became the equivalent of a series of grunts: picked two skiffs of pinks this morning, worked past dark on Seven-mile in a northeastern blow, kicker broke down around the island, arms going numb at night, can’t sleep. Language was a luxury. There was no place in my fishing life for literary allusion; I was body and muscle only. This was the active life, the life of doing, where salmon were salmon, the ocean was itself and nothing more,
and the day’s object was to pick and deliver as many hundreds and thousands of fish as possible. I wrote no poems or essays about fishing for nearly ten years.

I shouldn’t have expected otherwise. Commercial fishing has rarely been viewed as the realm of the contemplative. This belongs to fly-fishing, sport-fishing — men and women at rest in the wilderness, senses awakening, losing and then finding themselves, restored for return to that other world. Fishing here is not doing but being, or some magical alchemy of their perfect merging. Books and anthologies abound connecting the spiritual and the natural with sport-fishing.

Commercial fishing, though, is a business and so the second cousin from the other side of the tracks, the world of doing and action, where the bottom line governs all activities. Tasks are done in fast forward, so repetitive and at such speeds and for such a length of time that they are best done unthinkingly, instinctively, automatically. Your worth, both economic and personal, is often measured in terms of how fast you can bait the halibut hooks, how quickly you can pick fish, how long you can work without sleep. The all-absorbing intensity of the work, coupled, with many Alaskan fishermen’s schedules and lives on the water, does not allow for languid introspection.

And should a fisherman have the time for such, revelatory communication about his life’s work cuts against every tradition and fiber of this occupation. In fishing, sport and commercial alike, secrecy is required and assumed. Competition is intense, even cutthroat. When any kind of fisherman, sport or commercial, speaks, gross understatement or overstatement rules the day. No one expects otherwise: there is so much that cannot be said.

The traditional Alaskan fisherman’s seal of silence was broken first in 1993 by Spike Walker’s Working on the Edge: Surviving in the World’s Most Dangerous Profession: King Crab Fishing in Alaska’s High Seas. National attention to the dangers and drama of commercial fishing intensified in 1997 with Sebastian Junger’s The Perfect Storm, on the bestseller list for fifty-three weeks, followed by Patrick Dillon’s Lost at Sea. Almost overnight, commercial fishing became popular literary territory. Outside magazine, noting the growing appetite for such stories, wrote wryly, “If you’re a commercial fisherman, you’ve probably been contacted by an agent.”

The cameras followed the books. In 2005, the Discovery Channel took a risk on a new reality show trailing the lives and work of men in Alaska’s crab fishery. I hardly need to say more. “The Deadliest Catch” now airs in over 150 countries and is currently in its seventh season, catapulting fishermen, who normally worked in relative obscurity,
to world-wide fame. In the strange mix that reality TV has perfected, a global audience now rapely follows both the life-threatening extremes of crab fishing, and the most mundane routines and interactions. Books then followed the cameras—we include one of those fishermen here, Sig Hansen, with an exciting excerpt from *North by Northwest: A Seafaring Family on Deadly Alaskan Waters*. Wherever I travel, and other Alaskan fishermen report the same, I am met with intense questions and interest in commercial fishing. The silence that long shrouded the industry has been lifted.

Why, at the turning of the first decade of the millennium, in the post-information age, when more than eighty-five percent of Americans live in urban or suburban areas, are so many turning to television shows and books about men and women who break their backs, and sometimes lose their lives, pulling fish from Alaska’s seas?

It is not hard to hazard a few theories. Commercial fishing, as many know, is ranked as the most dangerous job in the nation, with a death rate from seven to one hundred times the national average. It does not require flights of imagination or verbal high jinks to create from such a setting and occupation the necessary elements of story: plot, conflict, tension, drama, and tragedy. All of this is built into the business of commercial fishing. But even story is sometimes not a large enough container. This is epic, even, the primeval, universal struggle of man against nature: men and women alone in a fifty-seven-foot boat against a twenty-foot raging sea, or wrestling a leviathan in steep waters, adrift in a suffocating fog. Yet these stories are not Odysseys or Iliads, where the Greek heroes, godlike figures, ultimately and inevitably triumph against all the malevolent forces that would keep them from reaching home and hearth. For all the courage and daring, in these recent writings and through the camera we see fishermen as thoroughly human, as beset by flaws, pride, and mortality as the rest of us. Their obituaries appear in our local newspapers; we leave their funerals weeping. Their stories read like sagas, feeding our deep human hunger to understand the ultimate battle against nature and death; but the lives are real, the losses are personal.

Yet, even for those of us who commercial fish, reading about the losses of our own, thrilling to adrenaline accounts of fishermen’s rescues and near rescues at sea is not macabre; it is human and it is necessary. Scott Russell Sanders wrote in “The Most Human Art: Ten Reasons Why We’ll Always Need a Good Story,” published in the *Georgia Review*, that story, whether fiction or nonfiction, is essential “to teach us how to be human” and to “help us deal with suffering, loss, and death.” Those who have
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suffered share their stories “as a way of fending off despair,” and as a way of teaching us to live consciously and wisely.

There is something here, too, about our national passion for frontier and wilderness. We are losing both the imaginative, mythical frontier, and the actual wilderness, we feel. Where do we go now to explore, to test our American mettle? Where else but out past the continents’ boundaries to the oceanic plains beyond. This is our Wild West. It is not by chance that the commercial fishermen who work this expanse are often called “the last of the cowboys.” At our fish camp, we speak a piece of this analogy daily. Our own boat, a modest sixty-five-foot scow we bought at an auction for a song, used mostly to tender our supplies to fish camp, was bought with the name crudely and audaciously stenciled on the stern: Cowboy. The twelve-hundred miles of the Aleutian chain are called “Out West” by those who live and fish there. In Alaska’s most wild fisheries, where fleets of wheeling boats stir a single bay to dust, reeling lines on lines, nets over nets, every boat unbridled, every set a maniacal, defiant few minutes’ ride—these are rodeos, we say: one of the last Wild West shows still playing.

The mythos of the cowboy carries with it a rugged individualism we still prize, but even more we are drawn by the physicality of the fisherman-cowboy’s life. Most Americans spend their work days harnessed to a screen, their wrists captive on the keyboard, their sentient bodies aching on uncomfortable chairs. Relaxation and leisure means more time in front of a screen, immersed in virtual worlds, some of which gain their virtue by requiring the waving of wands at digital images—as much activity as some people get in a day. As our physical interactions with the natural world atrophy, we hunger for sensual, whole-body experience with the wild forces of nature—earth, air, fire, and water. Even the agrarian culture that remains, accounting for less than four percent of the population, is increasingly distanced from feet-in-the-soil, hard-muscle extraction of the harvest, often laboring in air-conditioned computerized cabs and rounding up herds of cattle from helicopters.

It is nothing but romanticism to insist that someone somewhere still tills the earth, herds the cattle, and fishes the sea as his forefathers did. No one can compete and survive as a business in this global economy with such ideals; a population of more than 300 million couldn’t be fed. And yet, the fishermen remain, some fishing just as their fathers and grandfathers have fished: in fleets of small boats clustering Alaska’s coasts, working in homemade vessels with crews of two or three, salmon seining in forty-two-foot Deltas, set-netting in open skiffs, hand-hauling the beach seine, pulling a living from the depths with backs, arms, ungloved hands. We are anomalies, indeed.
Some of us in this book are still fishing close to the old ways. But nostalgia, television shows, and literary trends may not save us or others here from the same fate as the small family farm and ranch. A short time ago, there were many threats on the horizon. Today they are here among us: global warming which is measurably increasing the acidity of the ocean, affecting every level of the food chain; fish farms that raise penned fish, routinely feeding antibiotics against the diseases that proliferate, risking infection and destruction of the wild stocks; increasing pressure from sport fishermen to augment their own share of the resource by reducing the commercial fisherman’s catch; the threat of consolidation through the rationalizing of more fisheries, which clusters the resource into fewer, more corporatized hands, and shuts out the small, independent fishermen.

Much has been lost already. It is no longer enough to weigh anchor and risk life and health on the North Pacific or the Bering Sea or the Shelikof Strait for a hold of fish. Many fishermen have become activists, lobbyists, consultants, working off-season with the same determination as in-season to preserve the resource, or their own right to a share of it.

While fishermen are becoming increasingly vocal and public in their fight to preserve their livelihood and the natural resources, they are beginning to define themselves and write their own stories. Until recently, most books about fishing were written by outsiders, writers, and journalists who offered a peek or gaze into this other world. This is what makes this collection significant: the stories here are written firsthand by men and women who live this life. There is no filtering journalist; the writing and the events here are intense, direct, first person. They give a fuller view even beyond the camera, of the diversity, excitement, and risk of fishing in Alaska’s vast seas.

Collectively, the fisher-writers here have fished cod, halibut, salmon, crab, and herring. Some writing here have fished commercially for several seasons; others have spent most of their lives on the water. The rousing sea stories are here: the dramas of near-death battles, the sickening tragedy of lovers and friends lost to the waters—but this is not the whole story. This collection represents an extraordinary holistic view of Alaskan fishing: not just the dying, but the living; not just the obsessive doing of fishing, but the passionate being as well. As you read, you’ll understand why so many are hooked, unwilling, or unable to leave this uncommon life.

One word of warning: if you feel the pull of the nets, the bite of the gaffe yourself, there’s room for you here. But take heed—the hook leaves an unfading mark.